

Social Technology as a New Medium in the Classroom

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New modes of everyday communication—textual, visual, audio and video—are already part of almost every high school and college student's social life. But can such social networking principles be effective in an educational setting?

At the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) where I teach, students spend a lot of time on Facebook and other social networking sites. There is also an emerging interest in sharing academic achievements through social sites. RISD students have populated a rich repository of e-Portfolios in a directory (<http://risd.digication.com/portfolio/directory.digi>) which allows

faculty, alumni, prospective students and prospective employers to browse through student work. Giving students the ability to share their work in this way transforms them into authors and publishers. Brian Hutcheson, who recently completed a master's in teaching at RISD, created a program e-Portfolio as part of his degree requirement and an e-Portfolio showcasing a specific lesson on toy design he created while student teaching. (<http://risd.digication.com/curvinmccabe6/Home/>.) This e-Portfolio, which was shared publicly in RISD's e-Portfolio directory, caught the attention of a highly regarded art

textbook publishing company, Davis Publications, and was featured in their latest edition of *School Arts* magazine. Connections and opportunities like this arise often when the work of teachers and students is shared beyond the classroom through social technology.

In addition, schools and colleges increasingly employ new kinds of communications such as blogs and wikis.

Blogs. Blogs are simple online journals with entries organized chronologically—a structure many people find intuitive and easy to follow. New content is displayed prominently at the top, while older information gets archived.

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Additionally, blogs offer RSS (real simple syndication) feeds that allow anyone to “subscribe” to be notified when new blog posts become available. Comments connected to individual postings on the blog give the author the opportunity to receive feedback from visitors.

Blogs are great tools for class interaction. Teachers can choose to have one blog to post teaching materials, in forms of images, files and links. Comments can be posted by teachers, classmates, parents or anyone who has been given access. Receiving feedback about coursework from not just a teacher, but also peers or possibly the outside world can be very empowering to students.

They are easy to set up and usually free of charge. Popular blogging platforms used in classrooms include

Blogger (www.blogger.com) and EduBlogs (www.edublogs.org).

Blogs can be networked and created by teachers and students to form a community of blogs where students in a single class or even all students on a given campus can each present their own findings and discoveries.

A colleague of mine, David Bogen, created a rich, active community with blogs at Emerson College (<http://www.digital-culture.com>). Students are publishing their work, thoughts and ideas on a regular basis. For example, students in the “Digital Culture” learning community post all their writing and multimedia work from several classes within the blog/portfolio environment, and use the course blogs for organizing collaborative projects.

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Students are very capable of separating academic and social contexts. Emerson students use the blogs to collaborate academically, but Facebook to socialize.

Wikis. Teachers who want their students to be able to work together in an online publishing environment and need collaborative editing tools for students look to the wiki.

Wikis are often used for group-based writing projects, collaborative note-taking or brainstorming. Teachers can set up wikis for groups of students, allowing them to give feedback with equal footing, make suggestions and changes and jot down ideas. Everyone is an author of the wiki at the same time. Authors can start with very informal ideas and gradually edit and create drafts of their writing to be further edited and shaped by other authors of the wiki.

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The best-known example is Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.com), the online encyclopedia written collaboratively by users around the world. Its global popularity is a testament to the strength that a collective has when united to communicate, share and build content together. At a much smaller and more controlled level, the capabilities of a wiki in the classroom can broaden the learning experience, as student groups build rich, deep content over time. A great example can be found at Brown University's wiki site (<https://wiki.brown.edu/confluence/dashboard.action>), topics from "Biomed" to "Men's Club Soccer" can be found, with students collaborating across campus. In an interesting wiki created for a Chemistry Language course, students are building a collaborative reference of chemistry language terminology (<https://wiki.brown.edu/confluence/display/CHEM/Chemistry+Language>). Scrolling down the page, readers see a growing list of terms that students submitted with questions as well as instructor prompts, audio recordings of students using this terminology and chemistry equations.

Commercially available Wiki software such as PBWiki (www.pbwiki.com) and WikiSpaces (www.wikispaces.com) are very popular in the classroom today because of their ease of setup (usually 15 minutes or less) and their inherent flexibility and collaborative editing features. In Brown's Chemistry Language wiki, the instructor creates the structure of the wiki, invites students to join and then provides the students with guidelines on what kind of content should be submitted and how often (<https://wiki.brown.edu/confluence/display/CHEM/About+This+Site>). Providing the students with information about the purpose and format of the wiki leads to greater success within a course.

Online Learning Communities.

Teachers looking for school-specific collaboration tools may be interested in established, educationally based social networks and online learning communities that can address school- or district-wide communications. An example would be Elgg's educational social network (www.elgg.net) that leverages blogs. Another example is Digication's learning community (www.digication.com), which is based on e-Portfolios. These educationally based communities have safeguards in place to eliminate the dangers found in open social networks, like MySpace and Facebook. These networks are administrated by schools giving them the ability to control the level of openness, define permission settings and disallow outsiders who do not have passwords keeping the network safe and secure.

One unique feature that Elgg offers allows schools to run and host their own social network locally on their own servers. If a school has the necessary expertise in supporting such a network, staff can download the software free of charge and have complete control over the underlying code. Having access to the underlying code enables schools that prefer to be able to customize and manage software onsite using school owned hardware and IT resources to have that flexibility.

Digication's e-Portfolio based online learning communities give teachers and students in K-12 and higher education institutions the ability to personalize and share their content. At RISD's Art + Design Education Department, the students utilize e-Portfolio templates, which provide areas for syllabi, assignments, completed assignments with reflections by students and then evaluation comments by faculty. The e-Portfolio contains an archive of courses and assignments for each student for the entire degree program. From this

documentation, faculty provide regularly scheduled critiques throughout the program. The student may then use the information to create a 'job search' e-Portfolio. An example of such an e-Portfolio, also referred to as a Program Portfolio can be seen at <http://risd.digication.com/mwall/Home>.

Collaboration Motivates

Participation. The new generation of Web 2.0 solutions are easier to use, more engaging and are making a larger impact upon collaboration and communication in the classroom than complex technologies of the past. Technologies adopted in schools today, including blogs, wikis, social networking and online learning communities, are keeping teachers and students connected in and out of class. They are creating opportunities for groups to share, collaborate, showcase and grow together. In addition, they allow exchange of information and ideas not only within the confines of a classroom, but across schools, districts, states and the world. Even 10th grade computer science classes are taking advantage of social technologies for cross-cultural exchanges.

Teachers are amazed at how simple tools for sharing work and ideas can positively transform the classroom. Students who may avoid live class participation are leveraging new communication forms to become more active and "vocal" in a virtual class. The freedom to publish and share ideas creates a learning environment that empowers and motivates both teachers and students.

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